

Surviving the Deep Winter of the Church

The current economic recession is much more severe than we first thought, and the discouraging thing about it is that it's hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Along with this financial downturn, we, as a church, seem to be approaching a spiritual "deep winter."

The church of Jesus Christ has gone through more ups and downs than any other institution in history. Saying, "We have seen it all before," is never an overstatement with us. We'll get through this coming season as we have (100 percent) in the past. We outlast every other endeavor on earth, over time—always have, always will.

Please hear me: I am a militant *optimist* about the eventual outcome: God will get His way with all creation. But I am also good at reading the signs of the seasons. (Remember Jesus talking about the fig tree in Matt. 24:32?). Many of us came to faith in the heady days of the Jesus movement, the explosion of praise music, the charismatic renewal and the church-growth movement. We had spring, summer and even—as these movements matured nicely—autumn.

You may disagree with me, but I sense the chill of a long winter setting in. It could last a half generation, or longer.

Many Christians are just tired. One visitation pastor said to me last week over Thai food, "I am just so *over* church." She echoed the feelings of many young adults raised in our congregations who are staying away in droves.

Evangelism (actually leading nonbelievers through Christian conversion) seems like pushing water uphill. Most of our evangelistic tools from the '60s are totally ineffective with many of today's folks. (If you haven't had to rewrite your

“napkin drawing of a bridge” illustration about salvation, you haven’t been paying attention.)

I can’t tell you the last time we had a wave of “church shoppers.” It seems like we have to create the demand for churchgoing itself. Many of our churches would not fill up next Sunday even if we offered \$100 bills to new visitors.

Everybody wants to be “spiritual” but not necessarily committed to church.

Can you remember the times when thousands of young people, after attending concerts at Calvary Chapel church, were baptized in the Pacific; or the first time you heard “Shout to the Lord”; or the first time you saw signs and wonders blowing through your congregation full-steam; or when starting contemporary worship and small groups actually led to church growth?

We’re simply in a different season now.

We also find ourselves, as a church, in the razor-sharp meat grinder of the culture wars between the political right and left, which is shredding what little stability we have as wintertime approaches. Some of our congregations have literally been torn asunder by this “perfect November storm.”

This winter “season” could last many years; there’s no way of knowing how long it will last. So what good news is there in all of this?

Actually, there’s a lot for which we can be thankful:

1) Winter is a time for **study**. Picture Abraham Lincoln reading his Bible in the log cabin, to candlelight, in the primeval winters of a younger America. I like to imagine my Scandinavian ancestors huddled around the stove reading the classics, with everything pitch-black outside. We’re too busy planting and harvesting during the sunny days to take study

and growth seriously.

2) Winter is a time for **relationships**. In the kingdom, we are brothers and sisters for eternity. As some church programs dry up for lack of interest, we can refocus on eating and praying with those people in our fellowships who mean the world to us. When the task-orientation of high summer sets in, it's easy to see relationships as disposable. In the winter, we have to huddle together for warmth.

3) Winter is a time for **prayer**. In the frenetic days of summer, it's easy to be too busy to pray. The darkest days of Advent are the time to light candles. Cultivation of a prayer life is hard when church life is at full throttle. Busy pastors never have time to pray. The best time for that is winter.

4) Winter is a time to turn your heart toward **home**. It is not a time of travel. That comes later. Our church buildings were packed during the Jesus movement. Now, during an emptier season, we can focus on a Josiah-like repair of our houses of worship. Your church building has deferred maintenance that needs attention.

5) Winter is a time to **safeguard** our treasures. The "weather" can be hazardous outside. In past winters, Christians in monasteries had to safeguard the treasures of the faith while pagan hordes ravaged the countryside. We also need to keep the fire burning in the fireplace. The flame of the Holy Spirit must not be allowed to go out, or we will freeze to death. We need to defend the bride of Christ and keep her warm at all costs.

6) Winter is a time for **dreaming** about the coming spring. Planting season is around the corner. The trees will bud. The robins will return. God will do all kinds of new things among us. Many will come to faith. Our churches will fill again. But God will do that in his time. We don't know the day or the

hour; we can't even predict a simple childbirth, let alone a spring thaw.

7) Winter is a time for **faith**. The church is sturdier than you think it is. It is not going under or out of business. Jesus guarantees us that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

God must love physical seasons—He invented them. And plainly, by history, He also loves spiritual seasons. As Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season.”

Not every season is a season of revival. Don't beat yourself up as a leader because things are not as they were in the spiritual summer. You are not the master of the weather. Another summer will come.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe a lengthy winter season *is not* coming to the church. But I think it is. Winter is not a bad season. It's just different. Is it time for you or your church to embrace the good parts of winter?

And it never hurts to look forward to spring—which always comes: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22).

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